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AUTHOR Chew, Charles R.
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ABSTRACT

Reading to young children offers them many benefits including a sense of security which comes from physical closeness to an adult. In addition, the child perceives the format of print, begins to assimilate the basics of story construction, develops a prior knowledge base which is an essential ingredient of comprehension, and receives the message that information can be obtained from the written word. Common devices in children's literature include repetition, rhyming, story patterns, limited vocabulary, and listing. These devices support the learning processes of children and guide them toward literacy by (1) developing auditory discrimination and memory, (2) familiarizing them with literary devices that can be recognized in any text or used in any piece of writing, and (3) increasing awareness that the written word communicates for various purposes and in different forms. (SRT)

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Reading to the Young Child: First Step Toward Literacy

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Charles R. Chew, Ed.D.
Chief, Bureau of English/
Reading Education
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Reading to the Young Child: First Step Toward Literacy

Adults must read to young children whether parent or teacher, and reading to the child as often as possible will help to develop his or her language capabilities. You have heard this refrain often, but I believe it is one worth repeating frequently. The consistent experience of being read to as a young child has innumerable benefits which I want to explore in the material which follows.

For the young child involved in this experience, the physical closeness to the adult offers a sense of security and well-being. The world with all its confusion subsides for the moment. In addition, the child perceives the directionality of print, begins to assimilate the basics of story construction, develops a prior knowledge base which is an essential ingredient of comprehension, and receives the message that information can be given and obtained from the written word.

Most should have no problem in finding suitable books to share with children. Bookstores, libraries, and even supermarkets abound in suitable books. The use of the public library, found in almost every community, provides an opportunity to sample inexpensively a wide variety of books. Using the library on a regular basis also develops a worthwhile habit for the child and reinforces the idea that people use the printed page to obtain information, to communicate an idea, and to gain enjoyment.

As you sample books available for young children, you will discover some interesting characteristics of these books. Let's look at some of these characteristics and determine what implications they have for us and the children.

SIMILARITIES OF STORY PATTERNS

You will find any number of stories constructed in the same way. Many, in fact, begin with the same words, "Once upon a time". You will find that the story begins and moves to another point. Each time that there is movement of the story line, part of the story is repeated. The Gingerbread Man is a good example of such a story construction.

Each time the gingerbread man meets a new group, he says, "Run, run as fast as you can You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man." In addition, the gingerbread man always repeats the list of people from whom he has escaped, adding to the list each time.

In the story Henny Penny, you find a similar story pattern with some slight variations. Henny repeats through the story that the sky is falling down. The story also relies on rhyming names such as: Goosey Loosey, Turkey Lurkey, Ducky Lucky, and Foxy Loxy.

Stories such as the two mentioned above cannot only entertain the child but can help to develop the child's language and provide a story structure that benefits the child as a language user.

As you read the story aloud, you will discover that the child quickly learns the story by heart and will repeat parts of the story as you reread it. Give children an opportunity to do this. You can encourage them to predict what comes next, what words come next and in what order or combinations. These activities can at first be oral and then a time will come when the child can be encouraged to write down what comes next or to write her his own story similar to the one read. Another activity might be to have the child write the story you have read or to draw pictures which tell the same story.

REPETITION

In all books appropriate for young children, you will find repetition--repetition of words, sentences, parts of the story, and repetition of ideas. If we believe that repetition can be one of the keys to learning, then you understand why books for young children rely on this device. You should also recognize that repetition beyond a certain point could prove to be boring to the child.

The story, I Know an Old Lady, is a good example of repetition used throughout a story. We only need to examine a few lines of the story to see the pattern of repetition used in it.

"I know an old lady who swallowed a fly,
I don't know why she swallowed a fly!
I guess she'll die!"

"I know an old lady who swallowed a spider
That wiggled and wiggled and tickled inside her.
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,
But I don't know why she swallowed the fly!
I guess she'll die!..."

An so the story goes.

The child listening to the story finds that the story is constantly expanded but parts of it are always familiar. Because of this familiarity, the child can predict what comes next. Rhyme and word choice play an important role in denveloping the story as well. Rhythm dominates this story as well, and this particular story lends itself to song.

In a story such as this, if you stop reading, you can ask the one listening to continue the story to say the next word or line. Such an activity benefits the child and enables the child to do a number of things that I have suggested earlier as suitable to enhance language ability.

In the story, I Was Walking Down the Road, repetition is used in a slightly different way. Let me illustrate by using several examples from the story,

"I was walking down the road.
Then I saw a little toad.
I caught it.
I picked it up.
I put it in a cage.

"I was cleaning up the rug.
Then I saw a little bug.
I caught it.
I picked it up.
I put it in a cage."

As this story develops, there is the constant repetition of action plus the repetition of a rhyming pattern--road, toad--rug, bug--mail, snail. You, as a reader, could stop with the first line and ask what was going to be caught. Stories such as these are easily remembered and develop auditory discrimination and memory, expand vocabulary, and create an awareness of word relationships. All of these attributes assist the child's growth as a language user.

EXPAND KNOWLEDGE BASE

Stories for young readers also expand the child's knowledge base. The Happy Egg not only has the attributes of the books cited as examples earlier but presents to the reader the egg--bird cycle. The Carrot Seed illustrates the cycle of seed to vegetable and adds some hints of ingredients needed to make things grow. The Very Hungry Caterpillar shows the life cycle of

the caterpillar as moving from bug to butterfly, and at the same time presents the counting concept of one through five. In addition the common literary device of cataloguing or listing is used. The young writer will use this device over and over again throughout his/her school years.

The story, I Like Hats, is simply one long list, but the concept development of broad generalizations or categories with subcategories begins with such a list. The child will learn from this type of story that broad classifications can be inclusive and at the same time discriminate. The idea of specialization is also inherent in such a story.

A good activity to capitalize on for such a story is to develop ways to classify. You name the category and the child adds the elements to include. (Things I like, Animals that have fur, Things that taste sweet, etc.)

PLAYFULNESS OF LANGUAGE

Stories for young children capitalize on opportunities to play with language, to experiment with it, and to highlight the rhyme and melody of it. Although we can cite a number of such stories, those by Dr. Seuss illustrate vividly these points.

The quote below from Horton Hatches the Egg shows the musicality of the language and the effectiveness of rhyme.

"And he sat all day
And he kept the egg warm...
And he sat all that night
Through a terrible storm.
It poured and it lightninged!
It thundered! It rumbled!
'This isn't much fun,'
The poor elephant grumbled
'I wish she'd come back
'Cause I'm cold and I'm wet.
I hope that that Mayzie bird doesn't forget.'"

And this quote from McElligot's Pool illustrates how the writer can play and experiment with language.

"I might catch a fish
With a pinwheel--like tail!
I might catch a fish
Who has fins like a sail!
I might catch some young fish
Some high-jumping fishers.
I might catch an old one
With long flowing whiskers!

"I might catch a Sea Horse.
(Now mightn't I now...?)
I might catch a fish
Who is partly a cow!"

Not only do you get the richness of the language and how it can be used, but such writings give you opportunities to explore the impossibilities that the author has proposed. (You can talk about how funny a fish would be with long flowing whiskers or a fish which is partly a cow.)

Stories such as these (and there are many on the market) can provide a rich experience not only for the child but for the adult who is sharing the story with the child.

CONCLUSION

Devices such as repetition, rhyming, story patterns, limited vocabulary, and listing--and there are others--enable you to do the following for the child:

1. Develop auditory discrimination and memory
2. Provide opportunities for remembering and repeating a story
3. Expand her/his knowledge base
4. Provide opportunities to predict text
5. Develop concepts of story patterns and development
6. Familiarize her/him with literary devices which can be recognized in any text read or used in any piece of writing
7. Strengthen concepts which will be useful throughout life
8. Recognize that language can be manipulated for the sheer fun and enjoyment of it.
9. Understand that the written word communicates for various purposes and in different forms.
10. Illustrate directionality of print
11. Provide a warm and secure experience connected with reading

Who then has the responsibility for initiating and continuing this experience of reading to the young child? I would like to believe that this responsibility first and foemost lies with the parent; but given critical situations that exist in our present society--teenage pregnancy higher in our country than in any other western civilization, the increase in one parent families, and the poverty level of children and women growing by leaps and bounds, I can no longer be certain that the practice of reading to young children will take place in the home.

If such an experience does not happen in the home, then the responsibility falls to the teacher in the school, be it a nursery school, a day care center, or in a pre-school or early elementary grade. In my mind, this adult has the professional and moral responsibility to guarantee that children participate in this experience, and it will only be the first step toward literacy.